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Senior Project: Written Component

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*Prism: Processes of Collaboration Between Visual Art, Music, and Dance*

I grew up in arts schools where an art wing holds classrooms for dancers, visual artists, theater students, and musicians to hone their craft. Despite being so close in proximity, the arts functioned extremely separately and sometimes even clashed due to space requests, concert schedules, and time commitments. I always wondered why we did not try to work together and talk about art at large, learning each other's points of view and broadening our understanding of the art world. Because of this experience, bringing multiple arts under one roof in a collaborative process was something I wanted to explore. There are abundant examples of collaboration between visual artists and dancers in terms of set and costume and musicians often collaborate with dancers/choreographers to create scores, but what is less common (if present at all) is collaboration through improvisation. Each artistic discipline uses improvisation in some way, but rarely do they get to share the same space when going through their respective processes. My research aimed to determine how dance, music, and visual art influence each other during a live performance, when put in the same space with the same improvisational score and how these relationships are experienced by an outside eye.

This project included solving how to integrate these three art forms, figuring out the best environment and score for the artists to work within, and how to make what we investigated in the studio something people could watch and, hopefully, understand. Because this entire process

had an investigatory component, the methodology evolved throughout the process. To begin, I created movement phrases based on psychological studies of color and discussions about color association with the four dancers. I instructed the musician to create musical phrases on a vibraphone which would coincide with the colors that could be performed alongside the movement phrases. The painter's role for the performance (at this point in the process) was to create a painting in the performance space as the musicians and dancers improvised around the phrase associated with the color he was using to paint. This meant the main cues would be coming from the painter, infiltrating into the dancers and the musician. The color would provide the main structure, and the dancers and musician could make choices based on other aspects of the painting, such as matching the speed of the brush, matching the use of space on the canvas, or matching the thickness of line with their movement/sound quality. This approach had a very one-way relationship from visual artist to the other art forms, which I eventually found limiting and less interesting than the other types of interaction that we investigated.

Before rehearsals began, I researched psychological studies about color to inform the movement in the phrases. I started with red, and found a study done jointly by the University of Rochester and University of Munich that explored how color affects humans in terms of behavior and cognition. They state that there isn't much scientific research done around this subject and that this topic is highly dependent on context. Their study is on the, "influence of red in achievement contexts...we report a series of experiments demonstrating that a brief glimpse of red evokes avoidance motivation and undermines intellectual performance, and that it has these effects without conscious awareness or intention," (Elliot/Maier). They state that color perception tends to be non-conscious in nature so the effects tend to persist. The effects are

highly contextual – for example, green in America symbolizes money, but not all money around the world is green, so culture has an influence over association.

Results showed that red influenced poor academic performance and avoidance motivation (natural avoidance of negative stimuli). Red is seen as a representation of love, passion, and sexual readiness, which are most likely learned associations or “derived from the biologically ingrained use of red to attract mating partners during estrus in many nonhuman female mammals,” (Elliot/Maier). Andrew Elliot, co-author of the ‘red’ study, was also involved in an article published in the journal *Emotion*, that states that when humans see red, their reactions get faster and more forceful. Red provides short but intense energy boosts, usually in athletic settings. This is because it is seen as a danger cue. Andrew Elliot explains, “Humans flush when they are angry or preparing for attack. People are acutely aware of such reddening in others and its implications.” However, it is counterproductive to mental and motor tasks. When red was shown with the word “squeeze” in front of it, the participants squeezed more forcefully than when the other colors were shown. When it was flashed before a test, students performed more poorly.

We not only used this research to inform our red phrase making, but also created an association list ourselves that included anger, passion, love, sex, pain, blood, fire, impact, abrasion, reaction, fear, cars, and alarms. We created the movement phrase and then repeated this process for the colors blue and green. I did not find more psychological research, so we relied solely on our association lists. The lists and the resulting movements felt contrived and forced. I wanted a more authentic approach to movement in reaction to color, so I developed a couple of techniques to discover how color impacts the movement choices of the dancers.

In one of the rehearsals with the dancers, I set up stations of large pieces of paper with a colored pencil at each one. The dancers were instructed to draw in whatever way the color influenced them to do, then let that movement translate to their whole bodies and into an improvisation. I found some similarities between the dancers when they went to a particular station. Everyone who went to the light blue station did some sort of rocking, back-and-forth, unstable movement. The pink station led the dancers to more quirky and fun movements. In purple most of the movement was continuous, swirling, sequential, and circular. Brown influenced dancers to be on the ground – earthy and tactile. At the black station, dancers were heavy, did lots of start and stop movement, and were tense. Green produced many repetitive and bouncing movements. Red influenced a harsher side of the dancers, striking, moving spastically and with energy. This was the most exciting to see because it matched up with the psychological research I did. Orange generally brought about outward motion, reaching, and spoking. It is important to note that the dancers were all drawing with different colors simultaneously, so they did not have the influence of each other during the improvisation, which could cultivate similarities. It seemed there was already a collective pattern in how these dancers moved when influenced by specific colors.

The second exercise that we used in order to invoke visceral movement to color really shaped the entire process. I put the same colored films (lighting gels) over all of the dancers' eyes at the same time and had them improvise for five minutes in the "world of that color." I found that the dancers moved similarly in response to the colors and the feelings that were evoked for them were fairly collective, but even more so than the coloring improvisations because they did these improvisations together within the same space. The first improvisation

we did was with the red film over the eyes and after the improvisation we had a conversation about how the dancers felt and what I observed. Every single dancer felt as if they were avoiding each other and I observed that they moved like secret agents. Again, this is in correlation to the color psychology study, which leads me to believe we are onto something with the rest of the colors as well. In the green film improvisation the dancers were more internal, had a weird sense of self, and moved slimy, curiously, uncontrolled, and confusedly. The yellow made all the dancers feel nauseous and the blue film made the dancers feel as though they were underwater; their movement reflected that idea. Orange was a little more varied, but all the dancers moved with a lot of energy. Purple made them feel tired, feminine, regal, and relaxed. Finally, pink made all of the dancers interact and move with each other in a child-like manner. We took qualities and specific moments from these improvisations and inserted them into the set phrases in order to add movement that was more authentic to actual responses to seeing a color.

Once I incorporated movements from the improvisations into the set phrases, we tried a mock version of the project where the dancers improvised around the phrases based on the color that was displayed at the time. Immediately, I could see that there was no significant shift in movement quality when the color changed and it would be impossible for the audience to see the correlation between color and movement. This event that first felt like a failure taught me many things about my project and what changes needed to happen to achieve my goals. First of all, this clarified for me that I had the goal of making the correlations and responses decipherable to the audience. The type of audience I was expecting was one who could understand a compositional structure if it was laid out for them enough and who might expect to be taken on a journey through the color investigation, which was not happening yet as I watched the trial run.

Second, it was clear that the qualities of the movement were more easily recognized than actual movement patterns or shapes. Each color phrase we had created stood alone marvelously – there were many qualities and dynamic shifts in each one. However, with the blur of movement from four different dancers, there was too much going on to decipher the root of the color response. The dancers found it difficult to switch from one phrase to the next without just starting at the beginning; there was too much material for the dancers to get familiar with to successfully improvise around. I also was concerned that the dancers barely noticed when the colors changed (which were displayed by a colored gel held up on either end of the space) because the change of color by the painter could be even more subtle and harder to see. This also brought to my attention that the dancers needed some artistic freedom, as they are much more complicated than just regurgitating phrases on command.

This new knowledge sparked a shift in methodology for the best results. We dropped the use of phrases completely and just used the qualities from the gel improvisations as the association to color. The musician would not make set phrases anymore, but rather improvise around the same qualities the dancers were using. I had to make a big adjustment in how the color and visual art fit into the project. In order to make the color shifts as apparent as possible, we incorporated the color by putting the colored lighting gels in front of the projectors that displayed the live feed of the painting. The painter would be restricted to painting in black and white, so that the image looked like black and whatever color of gel was placed in front of the projector. This visual was reminiscent of what the dancers were seeing when they improvised with the gels over their eyes, so this way we could hint at that experience to everyone involved, including the audience. Because the color would be so apparent, the dancers and musician could

focus their energy on other aspects of the painting that were possible sources for reaction, as well as every other artist in the space.

Once I solved the color correlation problem, I thought “coding” the rest of the aspects would create more structure and perhaps more understanding from an audience perspective. There are many variables in each discipline: weight, speed, levels, and space in dance; line, shape, color, and light in visual art; and tambor, volume, and tempo in music, to name a few. Using these aspects I wanted to define what each one would influence the other artists to do. For example, the stroke speed of the painter could determine the dancers’ and musician’s speeds or the thickness of line could determine the weight of the dancers and the volume of the musician. These complex relationships were already present so I found “coding” each variable to be unnecessary. The point of making the structure more simple was to give the artists less to think about and more to react to and this step would have inhibited the artists from reacting in the ways they already were.

With this newfound knowledge, we clearly defined which qualities would be the essence of each color. The qualities were determined as follows:

Red: staccato, direct, angular

Orange: sweeping, curious, traveling, indirect focus

Yellow: shakey, heavy

Green: slimey investigatory, quirky (following inhibition)

Blue: smooth, liquid (no sharp edges)

Purple: lackadaisical, chill (visualizing jell-o like muscles, release, and free flow)

Pink: Bouncy, interactive, playful

White: stillness, resonance

In the time left before the performance, we focused on making the work into something that could be followed by an audience and interesting to watch compositionally. Investigating the interaction of these art forms in the studio was an incredible research tool and very interesting to watch in that setting, but did not have attributes that would make it interesting compositionally to an audience. I needed to work with the dancers to learn how to improvise within a group. I had the dancers use walking, jumping, and falling (a very sparse and basic score) to improvise around the space, only walking in a grid pattern. The dancers were instructed to bring attention to speed, duration, spatial patterns, proximity, stillness, and unison. This kind of attention towards the other people as well as how they worked within the group was transferred to our work with the other collaborators. The musician found that he followed the dancers a lot and tried to “go with” them, while still watching the painter as he worked, picking up on what he could. The visual artist liked to look up to the dancers when he needed a moment of inspiration. As the person who controlled the piece by changing the colored gels, I had to be attentive to how the group was reacting and if it made sense to continue the color for another minute, change the color, or give the piece a pause by taking away all color. After a couple of trial runs focusing on readability by the audience, it was time to take the research into the performance setting.

The first thing I learned in the performance setting was how much space the audience would use. Performance attendance was much higher than expected, and the audience took up about half of the space I thought the dancers would have. This size of space and proximity to the audience took away the ability to drastically change the dancers’ spatial and proximal relations



with each other, as well as made it necessary for there to be more stillness. The dancers felt more comfortable on the ground because it felt safer to move in a low level that close to audience members. Changing the colors was a different experience for me in front of an audience because I had to read not only the dancers and musician for when to change the color, but the audience as well. I could see when they had lost interest (looked for something else to watch) or when they got a clear idea of what was happening with a specific color. Because of this, I ended up using more dual colors (two gels at once) than I ever did in rehearsal to create interest and add variation. The painter was right next to the dancers because of the lack of space, so he felt more connected to the performance, however, the musician was more disconnected because of the mass of people. The first night had extremely low energy from the dancers and musician so the performance developed in a different way. I was trying to build energy with my color choices, but did not feel successful in this. For the next two nights I asked the musician to play louder and the dancers to not feel afraid to let one person move at a time so they could take up lots of space. By the third day the artists seemed comfortable in the space and played even more within the score than I had ever seen.

Over 400 people witnessed the work at the Urban Arts Space between three shows. After the performance, the reaction encountered from audience members were questions. People wanted to know if the dancers were using all improvisation and if the musician wrote the music he was performing. People asked what each color “meant” or what “mood” they were. All of these questions validated our research. The dancers and musician were working so in tandem and so clearly that it could have been set choreography or a set music score. People

acknowledged that each color had a mood or tone, which means the change in movement/music quality was clearly linked to the change in color and not vice versa.

I discovered that improvisation is highly dependent on environment and sensory factors through the process and performance. The artists made changes in improvisational choices each time the environment changed, whether it be a color over their eyes, another artist in the space, or the audience taking over the space from them. The influences on the artists and working within the unique score resulted in new movement patterns, unheard musical phrases, and a painting that is unique to the moment within which it was created. Each time the process is done, whether in the studio or in a performance setting, is a unique and ephemeral experience for both performer and audience.

The best thing that has come from this project are more questions and more ideas to continue the research. In fact, this project as a whole raises more questions than answers. This specific performance in January 2016 was just one way the project can exist. The project can be rearranged in many configurations. For example, I could switch the roles and the artist could be given the score while the dancers improvise freely. This gives the dancers more freedom and creates a different experience for the painter. I could also change the configuration so the painter only relies on the dancers for inspiration and the dancers only rely on the musician. This would put the musician at the center of the investigation with the “train of inspiration” starting with him.

I am interested in taking this project into schools with arts programs to bring their multiple art disciplines together into one room and expose students to collaborative processes. Using different populations to create the color improvisation score could give us different

outcomes and provide a brand new look to the piece, as the colored gel improvisations are highly contextual, depending on who, how they feel that day, the space around them, and more. Doing the improvisations with the colored gels over the eyes with musicians and visual artists is another way this project could manifest, grow, and change. It could be interesting to allow artists to move from one station to the next, or even let audience members go from station to station, allowing the connections to be carried through their bodies from one art form to the next. Ultimately I want to explore this project with people of different nationalities and languages to exemplify the incredible communicative nature of art. There are endless possibilities in terms of ways to experiment and learn through this type of research including changing the style of dancers, the instrumentation, the visual art medium, and the amount of people of each art form are included, and more.

By bringing three art forms together, I created a unique type of dance installation to the Urban Arts Space. Although we see collaboration between the arts, it is rare to see it in its pure form of live creation. In the process of learning how to bring the art forms into a performance, I learned just how much the senses, environment, and colored light influence creation of art. The artists in this project expressed how much personal artistic investigation was done through this process and I hope I can continue to give that to many more artists in the future. Dance, music, and visual art can all help push each other's fields when investigating together.

### Works Cited

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### Collaborators

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